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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the relationships between the organizational behavior perceptions of superintendents and elementary principals and the amount of role conflict and ambiguity expressed by elementary principals. A sample of 74 nonurban school districts yielded a total of 343 administrator respondents. The study analyzed relationships between the administrative roles of superintendents, assistant superintendents, directors of elementary education, elementary principals, and elementary building principals. The data analyses revealed significant relationships between superintendents and principal organizational behavior perceptions and the amount of elementary principal role conflict and ambiguity. An additional finding was that there is a negative relationship between open organizational behavior and the level of administrative position. The findings also support the research of behavioral scientists in recommending a higher level of participatory management in order to overcome the reduction of perceived autonomy in lower levels of management. (Author)

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The Relationship Between Organizational Behavior and Elementary Principal Role Conflict and Ambiguity

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Introduction

The role of a middle manager is one inherently filled with conflict and ambiguity. In virtually no other administrative position is an individual required to interact with both the management and worker levels and asked to produce and maintain a sensitive balance between the enforcement of organizational expectations and the fulfillment of individual worker needs. Roethlisberger theorized from the industrial setting that the foreman "is put in a position either of getting the workers' cooperation and being 'disloyal' to management or of being 'loyal' to management and incurring the resentment and overt opposition of his subordinates."[1]

The same problem illustrated by Roethlisberger can be observed in the principal's role in the educational arena. Constrained by the organizational structure and the limited rewards he can offer, the principal "must either develop strong personal bases of power or rely on his legal positional authority."[2] This apparent conflict of interests has grown in magnitude with the emergence of more militant teacher associations and public sector collective bargaining legislation. Thus, the relatively close ideological and educational relationship once found between principals and teachers seems to be waning. Whether principals collectively approve or not, their role as a middle manager in education today has shifted to one of management emphasis.

Along with this change has grown a renewed interest in the team management approach in educational administration. If such a management approach is to be

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[1]Fritz J. Roethlisberger, "The Foreman: Master and Victim of Double Talk," Harvard Business Review 23 (Spring 1945):287-288.

[2]Rachel Elboim-Dror, "The Management System in Education and Staff Relations: 2," Journal of Educational Administration and History 4 (June 1972):290.

successful, the superintendent and the principal must be able to establish an environment in which a clear definition of their roles is understood. It would thus seem that the administrative role definition developed and the resultant similarity of the superintendent and his elementary principals' perceptions of this agreement may have a significant effect on the amount of role conflict and ambiguity experienced by the elementary principal. This was the purpose of the study -- to investigate the relationship between the organization behavior perceptions of school district superintendents and their elementary principals and the amount of role conflict and ambiguity the principals perceived in their roles.

Background of Research

Theoretical and research findings from the educational and industrial sectors were used to form the study's theoretical framework. Primary among these was Getzels and Guba's theoretical model of social behavior. According to the researchers, two dimensions are significant in producing social behavior: the nomethetic dimension, composed of the roles and expectations that the organization imposes upon the role occupant and the ideographic dimension, composed of the role occupant's personality and need dispositions. Social behavior is therefore viewed as a result of "the individual attempting to cope with an environment composed of patterns of expectations for his behavior in ways consistent with his own independent pattern of needs."[3]

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[3]Jacob W. Getzels, "Administration as a Social Process," in Administrative Theory in Education, ed. Andrew W. Halpin (London: The Macmillan Company, Collier-Macmillan Limited, 1958), p. 157.

Garberina[4] and Guba and Bidwell[5] have investigated the role conflict a school administrator faces in attempting to fulfill the organization's expectations while also providing for the attainment of individual needs. Gross, Mason and McEachern[6] found from their study of 105 Massachusetts superintendents and their respective school boards, that the greater the conformity between the school board's actions and the superintendent's expectations, the greater the superintendent's satisfaction with his position and with the school board. Differences in expectations made upon the superintendents also created role conflicts in areas such as hiring and promotion, budget recommendations, and time allocation. Gross, Mason and McEachern concluded that the perception of these particular areas of role conflict "was not so likely to affect a superintendent's satisfaction with his career as it was to affect his satisfaction with, and to a lesser extent, worry over his current job."[7]

Results of a nationwide survey of role conflict and ambiguity conducted by Kahn et al.,[8] in which only one out of every six workers reported being free of job tension, underlined the magnitude of the problem. Additional data also indicated that thirty-five percent of the surveyed labor force were disturbed by the lack of clarity of

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[4]William L. Garberina, Sr., The Principal as Powerbroker (Arlington, Virginia: ERIC Document Reproduction Service, ED 108 353, 1975).

[5]Egon G. Guba and Charles E. Bidwell, Administrative Relationships - Teacher Effectiveness, Teacher Satisfaction, and Administrative Behavior (Chicago: The Midwest Administration Center, University of Chicago, 1957).

[6]Neal Gross; Ward S. Mason; and Alexander W. McEachern, Explorations in Role Analysis: Studies of the School Superintendency Role (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1958).

[7]Ibid., p. 277.

[8]Robert L. Kahn et al., Organizational Stress: Studies in Role Conflict and Ambiguity (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1964).

their job responsibilities, twenty-nine percent were bothered by amgibuity about what their co-workers expected of them and thirty-eight percent were distressed because they could not obtain the necessary information to perform their jobs adequately. From their findings, the researchers concluded that contradictory and ambiguous role expectations created opposing role conflicts which caused such emotional effects as intensified interval conflicts, reduced job satisfaction, and decreased confidence in the entire organization.

Rizzo, House and Lirtzman[9] developed an instrument to measure role conflict and ambiguity in complex organizations as part of a planned management-development program in a large manufacturing company. The researchers concluded that high role conflict and role ambiguity tended to be associated with goal conflict, delay in decisions, distortion and suppression of information, and violations of the chain of command. Those practices which tended to be associated with lower role conflict and ambiguity were emphasis on personal development, adequacy of communication, horizontal communication, coordination of work flow, adaptability to change, and adequacy of authority.

Statement of Hypotheses

Based upon the aforementioned theoretical framework, the study's major hypotheses were: (1) there would be a positive relationship between the similarity of the superintendent's and elementary principal's organization behavior perceptions and the amount of role conflict of the elementary principal; and (2) there would be a positive

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[9]John R. Rizzo, Robert J. House, and Sidney I. Lirtzman, "Role Conflict and Ambiguity in Complex Organizations," Administrative Science Quarterly (June 1970): 150-163.

relationship between the similarity of the superintendent's and elementary principal's organization behavior perceptions and the amount of role ambiguity of the elementary principal.

Ancillary hypotheses were also formulated for those elementary principals who were responsible to an intermediate administrator, such as a director of elementary education or assistant superintendent of elementary education. These hypotheses were identical to the major hypotheses except that the intermediate administrator and the elementary principal relationship was the primary area of focus.

The Sample

The sample was chosen on a purposive bases considering the two variables of school district size and wealth. Size was measured by the total student population (grades K-12) of the school district while wealth was measured by the state aid ratio of the school district. Kerlinger stated that purposive sampling, a form of nonprobability sampling, "is characterized by the use of judgment and a deliberate effect to obtain representative samples by including presumably typical areas or groups in the sample."[10]

The sample size consisted of seventy-four school district superintendents, forty-four intermediate administrators, and 173 elementary principals in Pennsylvania. Initially, data were collected from eighty-five school districts, however, because of insufficient returns, eleven school districts were excluded from the final sample. Sample districts were required to employ three or more elementary principals. Of the three to five principals surveyed, complete responses were required of two or

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[10]Fred N. Kerlinger, Foundations of Behavioral Research, 2nd ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1973), p. 129.

more principals in addition to both the superintendent and the intermediate administrator, where applicable.

The organizational behavior instrument, initially developed by Likert and later adapted by Caldwell and Easton[11] to a public school setting, was completed by each superintendent, elementary principal, and where applicable, each intermediate administrator. The instrument quantified the respondent's perception of his school district's management behavior on a seven-point Likert-type scale from closed to open. The present research upheld the proven reliability of the instrument by computing the Guttman's Lambda-3 Index and the Coefficient of Alpha Index to be .923 and .926, respectively.

The Role Conflict and Ambiguity Scale, developed by House, Rizzo and Lirtzman, was completed by each elementary principal. The instrument quantified the amount of role conflict and ambiguity perceived by the elementary principal on a five-point Likert-type scale. The Guttman's Lambda-3 Index of Reliability of the role conflict items for the present research was .826 and the Coefficient of Alpha Index of Reliability was .765. A Guttman's Lambda-3 Index of .867 and a Coefficient Alpha Index Reliability of .830 were computed for the role ambiguity items.

Findings

Analysis of the data indicated the existence of a significant positive relationship between the similarity of the superintendent's and elementary principal's organization behavior perceptions and the amount of role conflict and ambiguity perceived

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[11]James H. Easton, "The Relationship Between Superintendent's Management Behavior, Elementary and Secondary Principal's Rule Administration Behavior, and Leadership Perception" (D. Ed. dissertation, University Park, The Pennsylvania State University, 1977).

by the elementary principal. Both hypotheses were supported beyond the .05 level of confidence.

The relationship between the similarity of the superintendent's and elementary principal's organization perceptions and the elementary principal's role conflict had a measured correlation of more than -.36, which was significant beyond the .001 level of confidence.

The relationship between the similarity of the superintendent's and elementary principal's organization perceptions and the elementary principal's role ambiguity had a measured correlation of more than -.32, which was also significant beyond the .001 level of confidence.

Significant positive relationships were also discovered between the similarity of the intermediate administrator's and elementary principal's organization behavior perception and the amount of role conflict and role ambiguity perceived by the elementary principal. Both ancillary hypotheses were also supported beyond the .05 level of confidence. The measured correlations between the variables were -.42 (role conflict) and -.29 (role ambiguity), respectively, which relationships were both significant beyond the .001 level of confidence.

Following the testing of the major hypotheses, a multiple regression analysis was completed utilizing role conflict and ambiguity as the dependent variable in each of the two analyses. These analyses revealed that the elementary principal's organizational perception was the most significant predictor of both dependent variables. The partial correlations were .53 and .59, respectively, which along with the superintendent-elementary principal's organizational perception similarity, accounted for approximately forty percent of the variances.

A multiple regression analysis of the data from the sub-sample of school districts with intermediate administrators revealed a similar pattern, with the principal's organization perception accounting for the major part of the explained variance.

To determine whether differences occurred in role conflict and ambiguity and organization perception scores in districts with or without intermediate administrators, a Behrens-Fisher t'-test was utilized. The test revealed no significant differences between the two sub-samples in any of the study variables. In fact, data were almost identical in both types of school districts.

Further analysis revealed a "halo effect" whereby the higher the administrator was on the administrative ladder, the more open he perceived the organization's behavior to be. Superintendents, therefore, perceived the organization to be most open while successively lower level administrators perceived the organization to be less open and more closed. This difference in organization perception scores was maintained in all levels studied including a small group of building level principals with part-time teaching responsibilities who perceived the organizational behavior to be most closed.

Discussion of Findings

This investigation clearly indicated that a major source of role conflict and ambiguity for the elementary principal was caused by differences of perception between himself and his superintendent as to the predominant management behavior perceived within the organization. The data suggest that the more the superintendent and an elementary principal are in agreement concerning the overall organizational behavior of the school district, the less ambiguity and conflict will be felt by the principal. The findings also suggested that having an intermediate administrator in the administrative hierarchy does not affect the direction or intensity of this relationship.

However, it is also important to note that this superintendent-elementary principal consensus or lack of consensus is not the only factor that must be given serious consideration. Multiple regression analysis results verified that the variable

which explained a substantial portion of the variance found for the elementary principal role conflict and ambiguity scores was the principal's perception of his organization's behavior. It would seem, therefore, that although the superintendent-elementary principal consensus of organizational behavior is related to role conflict and ambiguity, the elementary principal's role perception of how decisions, goals, and school district policies are made is also related to the amount of role conflict and ambiguity experienced by the elementary principal.

Additional evidence was also available to indicate that the principal's perception of organizational behavior was more realistic than the superintendents. In those districts employing an intermediate administrator, a correlation of .54 existed between the organization perception scores of the principal and the intermediate administrators. This relationship would support the notion that superintendents perceive a more positive or open climate than actually exists.

The fact that the superintendent group perceived their organizational behavior to be more open while the elementary principal group perceived their organizational behavior to be less open bears additional study. This analysis suggests to the school superintendent that no matter how realistic he believes his perceptions of the school district's management behavior are, the very nature of the elementary principal's role, both in terms of the different job requirements and its hierarchical distance from the superintendent, will create a certain amount of distortion by the elementary principal in his perception of the leadership and decision making processes used within the school district.

Findings from this research investigation conclusively point out to a school superintendent that some type of feedback mechanism between himself and his management staff, in particular the elementary principals, be implemented and constantly monitored. Burbank emphasized the need for superintendents to seek and accept

feedback in his statement; "it is important for the chief administrator to maintain direct personal contact . . . a mistake to let the pressures of other duties preclude even occasional face-to-face meetings with individuals."[12]

The implications of these results are far-reaching in their application to the manner in which a school superintendent channels and directs the management behavior utilized within the school district. An immediate recommendation is that school superintendents should act in a more open and participative fashion, particularly in the area of group decision making involving the intermediate administrators and elementary principals.

This introduction of a more participative organizational climate will have an immediate affect on the elementary principal's role conflict and ambiguity; reducing both negative influences on his behavior and increasing his perceived autonomy.

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[12]Natt B. Burbank, The Superintendent of Schools - His Headaches and Rewards (Danville, Illinois: The Interstate Printers and Publishers, Inc., 1968), p. 94.

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